

Reflections on co-leading module reviews in partnership for academic staff to design an inclusive curriculum

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Introduction

This reflective essay will present the perspectives and reflections from both staff and students from the Centre for Learning, Access and Student Success (formerly Learning & Teaching Innovation Centre) who, working in partnership, have co-led module curriculum design reviews with academic staff. With over 3000 modules and 1300 academic staff at the University of Hertfordshire, there has been a need to offer support and guidance to academic staff on their module designs. Over the last few years, over 200 module reviews have been delivered. Each review is based on the guided learner journey inclusive curriculum checklist (see Appendix 1). Both the staff and students lead the reviews together and help guide the academic staff through the checklist during the review process.

Module reviews have been offered at the university for the last few years. It offers opportunities for academic staff to have conversations about their teaching with both professional staff members and students in a safe environment. Module reviews are offered throughout the year to academic staff, to help guide their online module design, look at how they can create an inclusive curriculum, and help guide their students through their content in the online learning environment. They consist of a Learning and Teaching Specialist, a Student Technology Mentor, and the Module Leader (the academic staff member who booked the session). They are normally an hour long, with discussions on module design, assessment,

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inclusivity, and teaching between all parties. Key to these discussions is the student voice and perspective when guiding academic staff through. The programme started relatively small but has grown over time, with staff often requesting a review. The reviews have also supported the university's quality assurance programme for module design, as it is seen as a service that works towards higher quality of teaching excellence. The feedback from academic staff has been overwhelmingly positive and they have valued having a student being part of the process.

Staff-student partnership

The module review process is a learning conversation co-led in partnership with Student Technology Mentors (STMs). There are two partnerships involved in the process: an established partnership between the staff member co-leading the review and a new partnership that starts at the review process with the module leader. The established co-leading partnership is worked on before the STM performs a review. They are given training/guidance and confidence building so that they feel empowered to be able to give their perspective and feedback to the module leader. They are guided into co-leading the session. The new partnership with the module leader can continue post-review, as module leaders will often return for further reviews as they develop the module. This gives the STM the opportunity to be constantly involved with the design and development process and helps normalise partnering students in curriculum design. Having this partnership project that runs across the institution, as one of many here at the university, has helped embed partnership culture from the beginning of the module design and throughout as an ongoing process. The partnerships involved have layers of complexity that need to be acknowledged and overcome by all partners.

Student partners for enhancing the student experience

The ultimate reason why we review the modules is to help support the module leaders to create a more inclusive online learning environment that will provide a better student experience. We could not envisage a process where you are working on the student experience without involving students. Therefore, it has always been planned for students to be involved

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with the reviews. The students are the end users of a module design, therefore their voice is an important part of the process (Healey et al, 2014). The points raised during the session are far more powerful coming from a student partner than from a staff member. They can bring their lived student experience, expressing what works for them and bringing teaching practice experienced from their own programme of study into the review process (Bovill et al, 2011). The student partners have played a crucial role for a key group of staff in the value of partnership. The sessions are often enlightening for module leaders, not only through looking at their module design but also in terms of experiencing student partnership for maybe the first time. Module leaders often come back for further reviews, and this is one of the success factors of the partnership.

Moreover, as a result of taking part in the module reviews, module leaders became more open to learning the potential issues that might not be easily recognised by them, as only students know how it is to be a recipient of the module:

“She’s [the STM] obviously the end user, so having her there was a bit like having access to market research. It helped me understand how we should be doing it for the student experience” (Module leader, Law)

Kahu (2013) points out that responding to the students' needs and expectations by enhancing and adjusting module design and content might in the end have a considerable influence on achieving better learning outcomes. Thus, the fact that module leaders started noticing why it is important to incorporate student perspective into the module design has become the significantly positive change that is progressively spreading through the institution, enabling adoption of more student-oriented mindset and practices in various departments.

Training

During the module review sessions, the role of STMs was mainly focused on providing feedback from the students' perspectives and ensuring that the module follows all the advice stated in the Guided Learner Journey (GLJ) Inclusive Curriculum Checklist. To get familiar with this review

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framework, all those STMs involved were asked to undertake the relevant training prior to starting. They are allocated 10 paid hours to complete the Guided Learning Journey online module that has been created by the Learning & Teaching Innovation Centre. This module not only covers what module leaders need to learn in terms of creating an online learning environment, but also the pedagogical theory behind why. There are also many case studies and videos of academic staff sharing their practice and experience. According to Yimam (2022), training should involve the organised alteration of behaviour by utilising learning methods to allow individuals to enhance their knowledge, skills, and qualifications, enabling them to perform their tasks effectively. To accomplish this, the training that the STMs received included reading through the instructions on how to provide review sessions and give accurate, constructive feedback to the academic staff, alongside developing a clear understanding of Inclusive Curriculum Checklists by relating them to relevant examples taken from practice. The training proved to be of significant help when attempting to co-host some of the first module review sessions. It provided basic guidance on how to lead the discussion and what areas of the module to focus on when reviewing them.

However, regarding the STMs' experience, at the beginning of co-hosting the module reviews, it was significantly difficult for them to get involved in the discussion, since each session is quite unique. Module leaders tend to have different expectations from the sessions, thus they need to be served differently. Moreover, each module is different in terms of content structure and design. In some cases, applying the GLJ Checklist might not be straightforward, therefore more individual approaches should be applied. Over time, it has been noticed that STMs started using more individual approaches to each module review which proved to be more effective than strictly following the framework. These approaches allowed them to notice more potential issues with the module design, as well as areas for improvement which were not listed in the checklists. Although this came with gaining relevant experience, they still consider the training itself as a crucial part of the process that had a great bearing on their confidence. The role of the staff partner in supporting the STM in building their confidence and role modelling the individual approach was also key to the process.

Creating a safe environment – overcoming communication barriers

At the beginning of the project, module leaders had various attitudes towards the presence of the student in the review process. Most seemed to be surprised and mainly focused on the conversation with the Learning and Teaching specialist, while only a small group seemed to have an optimistic approach to co-operation with a student. They were usually asking many questions about “What would students prefer?”, “How to improve...?” and “Why do students have difficulties with...?”. That second approach was noticeably led by the willingness to improve the module design and to get closer to students to support them with their studies. Over time, this approach became dominant, while the previously mentioned distance remains present in a minority of sessions, usually in the case of new lecturers with no previous experience of such a review process.

With each year, the staff partners have discovered that student partners need to have guidance and support to feel comfortable in giving constructive criticism. They need to overcome the power imbalance and role reversal of giving academic staff feedback. The co-leading staff member role is critical in empowering the student partner during the review process. They need to ensure that the partner has a voice during the review and role model to the module leader the partnership they already have. This demonstration of partnership to a staff member who may not have experienced partnership is a fantastic opportunity to demonstrate live what the module leader should be doing with their own students. Towards the end of reviews, the module leader will often ask the student partner directly for their opinion or feedback. Having the sessions online has enabled all partners to feel more relaxed. It has been important to make it a learning dialogue rather than a formal process. This enables everyone, especially the module leaders to be more open:

“The access to individual ongoing personal support for module design is absolutely key. Having a STM to work with me is worth hours of teaching.”

(Module leader, Engineering)

For each of the sessions, STMs were assigned to a Learning and Teaching specialist (based centrally, in the Centre for Learning Access and Student Success) who was co-leading the review

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process. This partnership was especially helpful at the beginning of their role when they were lacking the confidence to share their thoughts and opinions, which often included constructive criticism about the module design. They felt the barrier between themselves as students, and module leaders, which existed mainly due to the age gap and difference in the level of expertise in providing teaching in the higher education environment. The first few sessions that a STM co-leads are normally led mainly by the staff partner, encouraging STMs at every step to provide their thoughts by asking specific questions about certain issues. Those questions serve as a trigger for further discussion and sharing of their thoughts. At this time, both staff and student partnered co-leaders joined the sessions several minutes before the official start, to have an informal discussion, introduce themselves to each other and ask questions about the typical process of providing the module review session. These practices helped the STMs significantly build their confidence and motivated them to take a more active approach during the sessions.

During the sessions, the co-leading staff partner always treated STMs as colleagues, not just as students. This significantly helped removed the communication barriers, resulting in greater co-operation and providing more coherent and consistent feedback to the module leaders. They also practised carefully listening to each other to improve their work in partnership.

Consequently, both partners managed to develop a more professional approach to leading the module review sessions, as they were both treated in the same way by the module leader, without any barriers related to their positions. In addition, this co-operation allowed them to learn from each other and by this, broaden their knowledge and be able to look at the module from different perspectives.

Delivering feedback by partners

One of the key points influencing the course of the module review session is the atmosphere. If the atmosphere is significantly formal, it becomes challenging to provide feedback, especially when a student presents some constructive criticism, due to the existing barrier between the module leader and the less experienced student. However, if the module review is created in a less formal style, this boundary tends to blur (Carless and Bound, 2018). At the beginning, when

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module reviews were introduced, module leaders were sceptical about the presence of the student in the module review sessions, however, through adopting a more informal style in the session and encouraging everyone's contribution to the discussion, they quickly started to recognise the benefits of having the student perspective.

Another key point is feedback given to the module leader. By observing how the co-leading staff share their thoughts on how the module should be improved, student partners observed that feedback is not always negative, but also contains positive commentary to encourage the module leader to implement changes. According to Choi et al (2018), if the feedback is only negative, this might discourage the recipient from implementing the suggested changes and attending similar sessions in the future. In the worst case, the recipient might find the feedback offensive. Therefore, student partners have learnt that it is important to combine positive elements with suggestions for potential improvements to motivate the module leader to accept and apply the feedback. Adopting this approach enabled them to ensure the module leader's greater involvement during the sessions and encourage them to think about solutions to the issues. Thus, it is crucial for feedback to be formed as constructive criticism and to be provided using appropriate and checked methods. For example, a feedback sandwich approach, which many STMs widely adopted in their practice.

Regarding the perspective of STMs, they gained great confidence after acquiring experience in module review sessions and noticing why the role of student representation in the module review process is important for the module design's success. Although the staff partner was able to identify the issues in the module design that were stated in the inclusive curriculum checklists, there were some previously unidentified matters that could be addressed to improve the student experience and navigation of the module. As a part of the student community, STMs have direct access to their peers' opinions and thoughts that are usually shared in day-to-day conversations between, and after, classes. Those were complemented by their own experiences and observations which, together, allowed them to look at the module design from the broad student perspective. Therefore, they learnt the importance of sharing that point of view with module leaders, who sometimes simply do not consider asking students for feedback. Consequently, the module leaders might not be able to discover students'

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preferences (which often change due to certain circumstances, such as the outbreak of the pandemic and the switch to online teaching), when in fact the module should be tailored according to these preferences.

It is worth noting that the goal of the advice was not to restrict module leaders in design options and creativity. It was important to us that module leaders kept their content and design ideas while incorporating or improving some crucial points, so that the audience could benefit from their incorporated changes. We were also ensuring that accessibility is incorporated into the module designs. Assignments and feedback were also a typical part of the discussion. Our priority was to encourage module leaders to provide students with various forms of feedback, through role modelling our delivery of feedback to them.

Some lecturers decided to take it a step further and provide students with voice feedback that is simply a personalised recorded message, as they noticed that it helps to make a deeper connection with the students and encourage them to ask for help and, consequently, progress. Changes of practice like these are proof of the development of the community of professionals who are inspired by each other to produce better and more inclusive experiences for students. This is followed by the success of academic staff members becoming more aware of students' needs and preferences, resulting in the creation of more inclusive and student-friendly modules.

Recommendations

If another institution was thinking of doing a similar partnership project, there are a few recommendations below, learnt from our experience, that they could consider:

- Pay your student partners – they are there as colleagues and their time should be recognised.
- Provide guidance and training for both co-leading partners that are delivering the sessions – ensure that both parties are comfortable with co-leading the session

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together and find out if partners need/want any training/guidance before they start the reviews.

- The co-leading staff partner should mention from the outset that a student partner will be part of the review process and why they are there. Make sure introductions happen. Staff partners should introduce the importance of student perspective and tailoring modules to the student needs, at the beginning of each session to the module leader.
- Staff partners (the co-leads) can help the student partner be part of the review process by asking for their opinion/feedback. Posing questions directly to the student partner provides a space for them to speak. The voice of the student has had a far greater impact during these sessions than the same message coming from staff.
- Do not expect the partnership between the module leader and student partner to be instant. The reduction of barriers between student partner and module leader is a timely process, thus should be expected gradually and with patience.
- Encourage a student partner to represent various viewpoints from the students' community with the focus on inclusivity. Ask them for not only their perspective, but that of their peers too.
- Ensure that the appropriate feedback methods are being applied and are shared in a friendly atmosphere that will encourage further development.

Conclusion

Module review sessions proved to be beneficial for the organisation and development of teaching practices in the higher education environment. They are now embedded into our provision of support for module leaders and will continue for the foreseeable future. When considering students as a target audience, there is a need for further implementation of the student perspective into the module design. Although there is a likelihood that the presence of the student in the review process might create initial barriers in communication and willingness to attend, an experienced academic staff member should see student feedback as standard practice and something that should be included to improve teaching. The inclusion of student partners as co-leaders in the reviews, role models partnership to the module leader. Many partnerships have continued post-review, as module leaders have returned to the process. The repetition of the reviews has shown that their value has been recognised, and feedback from module leaders has been overwhelmingly positive.

As a result of seeing partnership for module development, a new student role has been created: Curriculum Consultant. These Curriculum Consultants are there to help shape the curriculum across a programme of study, working with programme teams to help deliver our new pedagogic principles called “Herts Learning”. This is an expansion of the current Technology Mentor role, specifically concentrating on supporting curriculum development.

Module reviews have been a small catalyst for cultural partnership change within the institution and this has worked from the ground up. They demonstrate in real time the benefits of partnership for curriculum design, and will hopefully be one of many more future partnership projects that will grow from academic staff experiencing partnership first hand.

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Inclusive Curriculum and Guided Learner Journey Checklist



No.	Audit statements	Yes	No	Partly	Comments including examples
	Homepage				
1.	Is the overall layout and presentation clear, easy to read, and uncluttered?				
2.	Does the homepage clearly state key staff members' names and how they can be contacted?				
3.	Is there a welcome video/audio recording/narrated Powerpoint on the homepage?				
4.	Is there an indication of how some/all of the Graduate Attributes will be developed throughout the module?				

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	Units				
5.	Is the purpose and content of each unit explained, e.g. using page introductions?				
6.	Is the language used inclusive: avoiding colloquialisms and providing a glossary of complex terms?				
7.	a) Are the resources delivered in a variety of ways, e.g. slides, Word docs, videos, quizzes? b) If yes, is the content representative of the student group?				
8.	a) Are audio/visual media utilised, e.g. videos, YouTube clips and images? b) If yes, is the content representative of the student group?				
9.	Does the content recognise that knowledge comes from different parts of the world and from people of different cultural and ethnic backgrounds?				
10.	Are pre and post class activities clearly identified (e.g. specific reading within Talis linked to the session; quizzes used for self-testing?)				
11.	Are there a range of different types of activity for students to engage with across the module? (e.g. quizzes, videos/podcasts/discussion contributions/article sharing/reading/)				
12.	Are sessions recorded so students can review the materials?				
13.	Are reading lists established within Talis and linked to units?				

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14.	Do reading lists indicate global authorship?				
15.	Do reading lists reflect diverse perspectives?				
	Assessment				
16.	Are the assessment requirements explained clearly?				
17.	Are the assessment deadlines clearly stated?				
18.	Are formative assessments available to help students prepare for summative submissions?				
19.	Are examples of assignments of a similar nature available to communicate the expectations of the assignment?				
20.	Are there assessments where students can draw upon their own background? E.g. 'open' assessment where students can apply a particular principle to familiar contexts.				
21.	Are students offered a choice in how they do their assignment (e.g. video presentation or podcast, report or poster, blog or portfolio)?				
22.	Are there opportunities for students to ask questions about the assignment (e.g. via online discussion)?				
23.	Is it clear if anonymous marking will be used?				
24.	Are the grading criteria and marking processes clearly explained?				
25.	Is it clear how the students can access assignment feedback?				

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26.	Are there different forms of feedback (e.g. audio feedback for one assignment and written feedback for another assignment, or even choice for students to identify how they would like to receive their feedback?)				
27.	How is the issue of 'social distance' being addressed in feedback strategies? I.e. some students feel less confident or less able to approach academic staff than others.				
28.	Are students encouraged to indicate how they've used previous feedback?				
	Students only (in addition to above)				
29.	a) Are there any case studies? b) if yes, do they reflect your everyday life experiences, including the community that you grew up in and the educational background that you have come from?				
30.	Is there any content you find inaccessible?				
31.	Do the materials use language that you find easy to understand?				
32.	Is the site easy to navigate?				

Adapted from Kingston University's curriculum consultant questions.

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